Rachel Clarke: We should judge Coffey on her policies, not her appearance

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Innumerable aspects of England’s new secretary of state for health and social care, Thérèse Coffey, could instil anything from disquiet to dread in an NHS doctor. I recoil at Coffey’s record on same sex marriage, for example: she voted against it in 2013 and 2019.1 Then there’s her record on welfare and poverty; she voted for a reduction in spending on welfare benefits some 52 times from 2012 to 2021, not to mention consistently voting against increasing benefits for people unable to work because of illness or disability.2 It’s a record likely to provoke deep unease in anyone committed to dealing with harmful consequences of socioeconomic gradients in health.

On women’s reproductive rights and a woman’s right to choose, Coffey has previously voted against extending access to abortion care. As a backbencher in 2010 she also introduced a motion in parliament calling for “mental health assessments for women seeking an abortion.” She defended the former health secretary Jeremy Hunt when he said he believed that the abortion limit should be reduced to 12 weeks, and after this year’s repeal of Roe v Wade in the US she stated, “I would prefer that people didn’t have abortions, but I am not going to condemn people that do.”3 Coffey says that she doesn’t intend to try changing the UK’s abortion laws, but I find this track record deeply unnerving, having seen how the religious right in the US has trampled on women’s bodily autonomy. Does anyone, anywhere, feel complacent these days about a woman’s right to choose?

But several features of the new health secretary simply should not, in 2022, be up for attack: her weight, size, appearance, and sex. The torrent of fat shaming, abuse, and frank misogyny that accompanied her appointment has been utterly dismal to witness. A photograph of Coffey at a party seven years ago, smoking a cigar while clutching a flute of champagne, has been shared with vicious glee on social media.4 Strangely, Ken Clarke, a former health secretary famously fond of cigars and beer, was treated more as one of the boys than as an object of disgust. Sneering at appearance is a gendered phenomenon, and women receive a vastly disproportionate number of attacks.

Coffey can and should be vigorously judged on her policies, her voting record, and how, precisely, she intends to tackle the catastrophic state of the NHS after 12 years of Conservative governments (no clear plans have been revealed at the time of writing). But her size? That’s not accountability—it’s nothing but nasty and weaponised sexism.

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